

Film-Philosophy 21 (2017)

Victor Fan (2015) *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 296 pp.

In the 1920s, the Russian formalist thinker Viktor Shklovsky made famous notions of ‘defamiliarisation,’ ‘making strange’ or ‘estrangement’ (*ostranenie*) through his conceptualisations of the role and function of art (for a reconsideration of Shklovsky’s work, see van den Oever 2010). In *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory*, Victor Fan performs a comparable theoretical gesture, albeit by geopolitically estranging eminent Western models of cinematic ‘realism’ and ‘ontology’ while passing them through defamiliarising prisms of ‘Eastern’ thought. To help achieve his goals, Fan draws on four complementary methodological approaches that find him working 1) *archaeologically* to excavate near forgotten Chinese works penned in the Republican Period; 2) to put these into *comparative* conversation with the classical Film Theory of the West; before 3) *retrospectively* and retroactively reframing them so that they can recirculate and contribute to our contemporary understanding of cinema; while 4) *theoretically* (and dare I say film-philosophically) activating complex and nuanced arguments regarding the status of analogue and digital technologies for approaching and evoking ‘reality’ (pp. 8–9).

To take but one thought-provoking example as a start, at one point Fan invites his readers to take seriously the Buddhist notion of reality being a mere illusion, which in turn forces us to re-perceive the cinema as a truly realist practice, in that its apparatus technologically generates illusions that appear somewhat real. Of course by crudely distilling a complex argument like this into a tagline means that I can do it little justice here other than to point out to potential readers some of the playful manoeuvres and prestidigitations that *Cinema Approaching Reality* promises to perform between the covers. Indeed, throughout this fascinating and timely book – which will be invaluable to post-graduate level students interested in Chinese cinemas, film theory and criticism, film-philosophy (and the philosophy of film), film history, media archaeology, and comparative studies more generally – Fan strives to ‘restore an interregional conversation’ between Chinese modellings of cinema and now-canonical Euro-American theorisations. More specifically, the book’s aim is to restore and reconfigure a cross-cultural discourse between the work of Chinese intellectuals, filmmakers and critics, and Western thinkers that include André Bazin, Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben and various other Euro-American luminaries (p. 3).

By such means Fan endeavours throughout to ‘deduce and reconstruct a theoretical space from the critical debates taking place in Shanghai and

Hong Kong between the 1920s and 1940s while opening up a comparative framework between Chinese and Euro-American film theories' (p. 8). One of the main values of Fan's readable and enlightening book therefore lies in its ability to (re)introduce its Anglophone readership to lesser-known or oft-forgotten Chinese cinematic commentators and models, while (re)circulating them as valuable components in 'the global process of knowledge production' (p. 197). Such endeavours, the book demonstrates, not only become pertinent to our understanding of cinema's celluloid past, but also its digital present.

In chapter one Fan first reactivates the 1980s writings of Chen Xihe and Zhong Dafeng, whose own surveys of earlier Shanghai film critics' work strove to disentangle it from broader interregional discourses. Fan here picks up on and re-examines the politics of Chen's earlier questions: does China have its own system of film theory? In comparison with the state of theoretical discourse in the West, is the state of theoretical discourse in China complete? Can we follow another specific logic to understand the state of theoretical discourses in China? Fan thereafter explores the political biases of Chen and Zhong's subsequent findings, which suggested that the 1920s Shanghai film critics – who worked under a system of semicolonialism – tended to be more interested in the evolution of the cinematic 'shadow play,' or the *xi-ju* (play drama), as opposed to the indexical ontology of the image that so captivated their European counterparts. 'To put matters crudely,' Fan says, 'Zhong implies that Bazin's preoccupation with the photographic image as the basis of his ontology can be seen as a form of *xiao youchang jieji quwei* (petite bourgeoisie cultivation) that is completely blind to the historical materialist conditions of the Shanghai audience in the 1920s' (p. 27).

Fan accordingly works to reconsider Chen and Zhong's own political positions and predispositions, and adds to their historical Marxist discourses by re-interrogating the trans-regional similarities and commonalities he sees emerging between the earlier Chinese and Euro-American theories. By so doing, Fan exposes how earlier critics such as Gu Kenfu tended to employ terms like *bizhen* (life-like, almost reality) to describe the nature of cinema, which does indeed appear to resonate with Bazin's so-called 'bourgeois' ontological interests. More than this, Fan also works to excavate other previously overlooked areas of overlap with Western ontological approaches to the medium (p. 18), which collectively generate a valuable cross-cultural discourse and debate. In the end, this exercise establishes that both the Chinese and Euro-American theoretical approaches similarly honed in on, and gravitated around the aporia(s) that emerge between

reality and image, being and nothingness, life and death, past and present (p. 42).

In a manoeuvre that is very much of the moment, chapter two of Fan's book zooms in on Chinese reactions to, and theorisations of, various notions of 'cinema as thought.' There, as in David Leiwei Li's recent *Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema: Globalization on Speed* (2016), Fan explores the different ways in which Chinese cinemas think or have historically prompted their viewers to think (and feel). In Fan's case, these include various conceptualisations of the cinema as a form of directed consciousness (which appeared to predominate during the KMT era), a pedagogical political tool of mass political indoctrination, or as a thinking machine that was adumbrated across several debates surrounding 'Hard' and 'Soft' cinema models (wherein cinema is broadly seen as either a political and educational tool on the one hand, or a formalist and artistic machine on the other). This eye-opening chapter also focuses on Chinese critics's reading and reception of Soviet approaches to socialist filmmaking (particularly as was expressed by intellectual filmmakers such as Sergei M. Eisenstein and V.I. Pudovkin) and Marxist film criticism that alerted the citizenry to the dangers of Hollywood entertainment, which threatened to sneak capitalist ideology and bourgeois modes of production through the defensive walls like a Trojan horse. This riveting chapter also delves into how film form, or the film body, was perceived to function as a cerebral prosthesis.

This latter discussion in particular allows Fan to forge links between the writing of several Shanghai critics during the 1930s and the later cine-philosophical writings of Deleuze, most specifically his immanent conception of the 'brain as screen' (Deleuze 2000: 366). While stopping short of saying that 'the Shanghai film critics in the 1930s anticipated Deleuze,' Fan's comparison nonetheless highlights how 'the Marxist theoretical preoccupation with consciousness generates this resonance between Eisenstein and Pudovkin, the Shanghai critics and their Soviet counterparts, and Deleuze and generations of Marxist film theorists who believe that the film as a body thinks and enacts a political thought' (p. 70).

The philosophical engagement with Deleuzian thought carries over into the following chapter, which to my mind is the standout of the book. There, Fan explores the films and writing of Fey Mou, whose own output appears influenced by many different intellectual debates and streams, but is arguably most famous today for its Confucian values and outlooks. In the Fey chapter, readers are introduced to two key concepts that Fey himself devised (casually in his writing, but 'rigorously' in his

films): *xuanxiang* (suspension-imagination) and *kongqi* (air, but more commonly translated as atmosphere) (p. 112). Using these as the key to understanding the director's greater body of film work, Fan investigates how Fey's films appears to show that the ontological basis of the cinema is not necessarily located 'in time, but in the Confucian concept of *ren*' ('benevolence,' or 'the highest ethical principle in social and political relations,' but also a notion of 'being human, that is, an ontological order that is instantiated in all human relationships') (p. 112). Fan here again links Fey's film 'thinking' to the writing of Deleuze, amongst others, particularly with regard to how his films appear to conflate the actual and the virtual and unfold complex images of time, while capturing the flows of desire.

Drawing on David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's framing of film as an artform from which spectators ultimately derive enjoyment and entertainment, Fan also explores the *fabula* and *syuzhet* of *Xiao cheng zhi chun/Spring in a Small Town* (China, 1948), in order to demonstrate what Fey's Confucian film thinking looks and feels like. In one pivotal reading, Fan charts a dynamic flow of desire that is made palpable as it flows around and in-between a web of different bodies. There, Fey's masterful compositions, framings and mise-en-scene are shown to operate on four different but interconnected registers, which loosely correspond to the principle characters in the scene, and which make their multivalent feelings and outlooks palpable to the senses. What becomes of key importance is the way in which Fey's unique cinematic technique allows audiences to sense an absented desire, which is made present in the atmosphere, even if as 'a desire that folds back to itself, a desire for desire that lingers in the air in all its immanence,' and ultimately by means of its tangible absence. In this way, Fan shows how Fey is able cinematically to crystallise 'desire that is yet to be actualised, and to a certain extent, the human decision not to desire despite each individual's desire to do so' (pp. 132–134). Fan thereafter explores Fey's *Kǒng Fūzǐ/Confucius* (China, 1940), wherein the synthesis of form and content make manifest the director's cerebral cine-aesthetic. Here, aesthetic principles and a touch of *ren* help to make sense of Fey's Confucian film theory (Fan 2015: p. 148).

In other chapters Fan explores the work of 1890s and 1930s critics and writers on the cinematic apparatus. In chapter three, for example, Wang Guowei, Zhang Junmai, Linda Liu, Zhang Taiyan, and Yan Fu's theorisations of the power and beauty of Chinese shadowplays are read as at once emerging from a Confucian and Buddhist cultural context, while simultaneously being engaged in cross-regional dialogues with Charles Darwin, Immanuel Kant, Henri Bergson, Bazin and Deleuze (among others). Readers are here treated to historical analyses that unearth the

impact of Darwinian theories (and notions of social Darwinism in particular) upon Confucian concepts, and by extension the Chinese language itself. In a later chapter Fan also tackles Cantonese sound films and musical plays, exploring how these filmmakers appeared more interested in 'sketching ideation so their spectators would appreciate not a fictional representation of life, but life itself as it is instantiated in a network of human relationships' (p. 154). Throughout the book, explorations into sound, image, the inner rhythm of the cinema, aesthetics (*qua* beauty), consciousness, embodiment, temporality, the supersensible, and the is-ness (*rushi*) of cinematic affect are all dazzlingly engaged with. *Cinema Approaching Reality* likewise engineers a mind-bending dialogue across time and space between the Shanghai critics and Deleuze's writing on Baruch Spinoza and immanence (and Agamben's updating thereof), specifically regarding the subsistence of a *conatus* as/within a single substance that is God (pp. 105–108).

In his conclusion, Fan strives to pull together several threads laced throughout the book and which invite readers to question what it is that this interregional dialogue regarding the nature of analogue cinema can tell us about the theorisation of the digital image and contemporary cinema today. Overall, *Cinema Approaching Reality* succinctly and successfully demonstrates that film theory is not exclusively a Western practice, nor should the task of rethinking film theory as a global discourse be a trifling exercise in adding works from other parts of the world into the Euro-American canon. Instead, Fan demonstrates that 'a global understanding of film theory requires rewriting our approaches to major issues by highlighting the conceptual and intellectual connections between major theorists around the world' (p. 195).

After taking readers through the proverbial Chinese looking glass and after having both literally and metaphorically 'shanghaied' film theory as Western students of cinema might know it, Fan's final gesture is to unbutton Bazin's famous ontological question 'What is Cinema?'¹ Instead of asking what cinema is, he invites his readers to ponder the more enigmatic Zen-like problem of 'What is not cinema?' (p. 222). This always untimely question demonstrates another way in which Fan's book is (paradoxically) again very much of its moment, for it forces readers to consider the multiple non-cinematic (socio-political, economic, cultural and technological) forces and factors that always-already filter and

1. In *Lost In Translation* (2010), Homa King reminds us that the verb 'to shanghai' colloquially means 'to drug or otherwise render insensible, 'as well as 'to transfer or forcibly abduct' (p. 51).

impress what critics and the cinema can and do think at different moments and in different places (see, for example, Eisenstein 1989; Elsaesser 2004, 2006, 2008; Brown 2016; Nagib 2016).

David H. Fleming
University of Nottingham Ningbo China
DOI: 10.3366/film.2017.0038

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brown, William (2016), 'Non-Cinema: digital, ethics, multitude' *Film-Philosophy*, 20, World of Cinemas Special Section, pp. 104–130.
- Deleuze, Gilles (2000), 'The Brain is the Screen: An Interview with Gilles Deleuze' (trans. Marie Therese Guirgis), in Gregory Flaxman (ed.), *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 365–374.
- Eisenstein, Sergei M. (1989) 'Montage and Architecture' (trans. Michael Glenney), *Assemblage*, 10 (December), pp. 111–131.
- Elsaesser, Thomas (2004) 'The New Film History as Media Archaeology,' *CINeMAS* 14: 2–3, pp. 75–117.
- Elsaesser, Thomas (2008) 'Afterword: Digital Cinema and the Apparatus: Archaeologies, Epistemologies, Ontologies,' in Bruce Bennett, Marc Furstenau and Adrian Mackenzie (eds.), *Cinema and Technology. Cultures, Theories, Practices*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 226–240.
- Elsaesser, Thomas (2006) 'Early Film History and Multi-Media: An Archaeology of Possible Futures?' in Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (eds.), *New Media, Old Media. A History and Theory Reader*, New York: Routledge, pp. 13–25.
- King, Homa (2010), *Cinema Approaching Reality*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Li, David Leiwei (2016) *Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema: Globalisation on Speed*, New York: Routledge.
- van den Oever, Annie (ed.) (2010) *Ostrannenien: On 'Strangeness' and the Moving Image*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Nagib, Lúcia (2016), 'Non-Cinema, or the Location of Politics in Film' *Film-Philosophy* 20, pp. 131–148.